
Blues face tough task in play-offs

O'Neill says
players have
what it takes

By **CLAIRE NASH**

WYCOMBE embark on an epic task at far-flung Carlisle on Sunday – to defy the odds which started stacking against them after failing to earn automatic promotion.

The force is very much with their opponents who have stormed into the play-offs with a seventh-place finish on the back of four wins in six games. They beat Division Three champions Shrewsbury and fellow play-off combatants Preston in that series.

But Martin O'Neill believes Blues can buck a play-off trend where the club with momentum has often gone up in a blaze of glory at a 'nearly automatic' side's expense.

"We are still capable of getting promotion and I suppose if your heart can stand it, the best way to do it is by winning at Wembley," said the manager this week.

The bookies can't split Blues and Carlisle, who Wycombe play in the semi final home leg next Wednesday (ko 7.45pm). They are 5-2 joint favourites to go up, with Torquay and Preston trailing.

Adrift

Wanderers were resigned to tackling the play-offs after a draw with Preston and Crewe's win at Chester settled the issue on Saturday. It left them fourth on 70 points, three adrift of Crewe.

But winning the Evening Standard Five-A-Side competition at Wembley on Monday was a very welcome shot in the arm for their morale.

"It has given us a great lift. The players were looking in awe of some of the players there, like Tony Adams. But then they were going out and beating them."

Goalkeeper Paul Hyde did not play in the tournament to protect a knee which he strained in the Preston match. O'Neill says his keeper should be back for the semi final leg at Brunton Park. Defender Simon Stapleton is doubtful after pulling a hamstring.

Blues earned three points from six against Carlisle this season. They began the season at Brunton Park with a 2-2 draw and won 2-0 at home last December.

"Carlisle have strung a lot of good results together," said Hyde. But he added: "We are good enough to go up."

● **Blues round-up: Pages 26 and 27**